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ABSTRACT

Teachers need to stay abreast of the latest trends in the language arts to offer an updated curriculum. The language arts areas are vital in each academic discipline and integrate well with diverse subject matter areas. Some common trends when reading the literature on teaching the language arts are: portfolios; journaling; computerized reading programs; time for pupil reflection on what has been learned; holism in reading instruction; writing using invented spelling; emphasis on constructivism as a philosophy of instruction; importance of scientific research to ascertain good teaching practices; pupils' learning by discovery; cooperative learning; and emphasis on integration of content. (Contains 12 references.) (NKA)

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Recent Trends in the Language Arts.

ED 481 437

by Marlow Ediger

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RECENT TRENDS IN THE LANGUAGE ARTS

There are selected trends which are in evidence when surveying literature pertaining to the teaching of language arts. These trends are somewhat lasting in duration and not the come and go approach. While a trend needs to endure for a selected period of time, it should not be the flighty kind which hardly last long enough to be called salient. New ideas and beliefs in teaching the language arts also need to be on the horizon, but should be inherent long enough in teaching to assess their worth as a trend. Which are some common trends when reading the literature on teaching the language arts?

Trends in Teaching the Language Arts

Portfolios have been in vogue in the language arts as a rather recent innovation. It is emphasized by selected language arts educators as an alternative to state mandated testing to ascertain pupil achievement. Since state mandated tests are the law in all states in the nation, portfolios have been stressed in addition to state mandated testing in a more balanced evaluation program. Thus, state mandated testing with its precise scores in measurement emphasized in yearly tests from grades three through eight needs an additional component to indicate classroom achievement on a daily, weekly, and/or monthly basis. Thus, the portfolio indicates pupil achievement in written products over a sequential period of time, such as one quarter or one semester. The portfolio should not become too bulky so that it is unwieldy to evaluate its contents. Nor should it be so thin in volume that a total picture of the child's achievement is impossible. It is good to have outside appraisers assess each port folio to notice pupil progress. Agreement in terms of quality criteria needs to be there to obtain interscorer reliability. Otherwise if the raters of a port folio disagree much on the merits of the product, there may not be much reliability in the assessment.

Items to be placed into a port folio include

1. snapshots of construction projects, involving language arts, completed by the learner.
2. art work as it relates to language arts instruction.
3. cassette recordings or oral endeavors.
4. a video tape of committee work which indicates the quality of pupil interaction in ongoing language arts lessons and units of study.
5. a self evaluation form completed by the involved pupil (Ediger, 1997, Chapter Five).

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Second, journaling has been stressed by educators in ongoing lessons and units of study in the language arts. Generally, pupils write entrees in the journal pertaining to impressions gained from a daily lesson. The journaling activities also stress the following:

1. what has been learned from a lesson.
2. what is left to learn.
3. which questions and problems a pupil has from a discussion or from a reading experience.
4. which projects the learner would like to engage in and how these would be implemented.
5. which learning activities would help to achieve more optimally.

Presently, some schools stress dialog journaling. Here, two or three pupils discuss ideas or identify questions/problems when communicating with each other in writing. Interaction among pupils is involved in writing as the means of communication. Dialog journaling may also be done with the use of a computer, The media used depends upon what is available and what motivates a pupil to learn. There can be journaling across the curriculum, such as a history journal or a science journal. Thus, in a historical unit, the pupil would communicate what has been learned (Ediger, 1998, Chapter Eight)

Third, computerized reading programs are used in selected schools. The Accelerated Reader is one example. Here, the pupil may choose which book to read from a listing on the menu. The titles cover a variety of genres and areas of knowledge. They are also written on diverse levels of reading achievement. After a selection has been completed in reading, the pupil may take a computerized test/evaluation to notice reading comprehension and achievement. Diagnostic information is provided to the pupil and to the teacher. The pupil may achieve as rapidly as abilities permit.

The word processor should be used by all pupils, when readiness permits, to do the writing of papers and written classroom assignments (See Symonds).

Fourth, time for pupil reflection on what has been learned is becoming quite common as an innovation in the language arts curriculum. Unless learners reflect upon subject matter learned, they may retain little of what has been learned. Reflection involves different kinds of thinking. Indepth thought emphasizes going beyond facts to doing critical and creative thinking. With critical thinking, pupils learn to analyze ideas into component

parts. This results in appraising content to notice facts versus opinions, fantasy from reality, as well as accurate from inaccurate ideas. Creative thought stresses the pupil coming up with unique and novel ideas. Originality of ideas is important such as in brain storming.

Creative and critical thinking is done in context as a result of reading, writing, speaking, and listening in ongoing activities. These kinds of thinking provide ideas for creative writing and oral communication. New ideas are desired from a pupil in critical and creative thinking situations which then can be used in diverse learning experiences in the language arts. (See Douillard).

Fifth, holism in reading instruction is emphasized to balance the curriculum with phonics. Phonics traditionally has received considerable attention, but there are too many inconsistencies between symbol (grapheme) and sound (phoneme) in the English language to stress a systematic procedure of phonics instruction. Thus, balance in the reading curriculum needs to be emphasized with holism in the teaching of reading. Holism in reading instruction is stressed with language experience approaches, Big Book procedures, individualized reading, sustained silent reading (SSR), among others. Holism emphasizes meaning theory whereby pupils hear and read entire portions of the entire reading selection. Phonics stresses parts in the word and analyzes to notice how it is to be pronounced. Phonics is one approach to use in identifying unknown words while reading. Context clues also stress analyzing an unknown word, but also holism is stressed in how an unknown word relates to the other words in a sentence or even a paragraph. The holistic versus the phonic procedure in reading instruction will continue, but it should not be an either/or debate. Perhaps, it is more fair to stress both holism and phonics (See Brown).

Sixth, writing in the language arts has advocates of invented spelling for young children to use in written work. Young children may then use phonics to spell words without the correct spelling being in evidence. One problem might be that pupils practice spelling what is incorrect. This may make for learning which becomes habitual and is hard to break. However, creativity is stifled as pupils struggle over spelling words correctly when they should be attending to sequential ideas being put in print. With inventive spelling, pupils may write content much sooner than would otherwise be the case. It becomes a matter for the teacher to assess and decide when it pupils are ready to spell words correctly in writing in contextual writing.

In spelling textbooks, a strong emphasis may be placed

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upon pupils learning to spell words correctly which pattern. Pupils might be affected too much with learning to spell words which pattern and yet while writing ideas, there may be little patterning of words written. There are advocates of teaching spelling who believe that new words in a spelling list should relate to a unit title, thus minimizing the patterns approach. There are problems to work out in the language arts with the spelling curriculum such as inventive spelling for young children versus correct spelling when writing, as well as studying words which pattern versus new spelling words which follow a unit title. Sound/symbol relationships do present problems to pupils in reading and spelling (Ediger and Rao, 2003).

Seventh, many language arts experts emphasize Constructivism as a philosophy of instruction. With Constructivism, the pupil constructs his/her own knowledge within ongoing learning opportunities. Perhaps, all construct knowledge and revise that which has been constructed as time goes on. New knowledge and experiences brought into the schema make for revised perceptions. With open ended questions/problems raised by the teacher in class, pupils seek new ideas in the language arts curriculum. Constructivism may be compared with measurable knowledge as tested for in state mandated testing. Multiple choice test items on these tests make for pupils choosing one of four responses which is the correct one. State mandated tests as compared to constructivism emphasizes the following:

1. preciseness of knowledge which can be measured.
2. pupils reveal knowledge through testing rather than in functional life like situations.
3. a single test score indicates what pupils have learned.
4. pupils pass tests given in grades three through eight, before going on to the next higher grade level.
5. schools penalized if for two consecutive years they show no progress, according to test results (See Slavin and Karweit).

Somewhat opposite of state mandated test results is the use of port folios to indicate pupil achievement. The port folio shows pupil achievement from random samples of classroom work during a time interval such as six weeks. Here, the pupil with teacher guidance develop a port folio containing daily written work of the learner. Snapshots may also be placed into the port folio of art and construction work as it relates directly to ongoing lessons and units in the language arts. The port folio

emphasizes constructivism as it contains pupil work and products. Parents and other responsible individuals may view and evaluate the results of the port folio. State mandated test scores are generally not a part of the port folio since constructivism is based on beliefs that pupil achievement can not be measured using numerals (Ediger, 2002, 7- 10).

Eighth, the importance of scientific research has received considerable attention from language arts educators. The National Reading Panel endorsed the idea of using scientific research only, to ascertain good teaching practices. Scientific research is defined as using experimental studies research results to determine what works in reading instruction. Using experimental study results only, eliminates correlational studies, questionnaires, qualitative research, and observational studies in doing acceptable research. The results from experimental studies, as do all educational research approaches, have their strengths and weaknesses. To use experimental research results, called scientific research by the NRP, has the following weaknesses:

1. it is difficult to obtain random subjects (pupils) in the school setting since learners are assigned into classrooms. Pupils then cannot be uprooted from the classroom to do research involving randomization.
2. measurement instruments used vary in what is being measured. Thus, an achievement test may measure knowledge largely, or skills only. If a self developed measurement instrument is used by those doing the research, then a long process of determining validity and reliability is in the offing to standardize the instrument for measuring.
3. it takes a considerable amount of time for an experimental study to be completed by researchers. An estimate might well be an entire year for its completion. If the research involves a longitudinal study, then the length of time would need to be increased.
4. it is difficult for the research group to obtain the cooperation of the place where the study is being done. The teachers in the school classrooms might be suspicious of what is being done and will wish to modify the procedure used based on what is perceived "necessary."
5. doing good research is costly in terms of money and time. Research universities would then need to engage in completing experimental studies. Much state and federal funding in doing high quality research is necessary.
6. completed research may have problems dealing with external validity in that the place where the study was made is

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so different from the school classroom setting where the research results may be applied. Thus, for example, the setting of the research study had the state of the art of teaching/learning supplies for children, but the place of application has a very minimal number of available materials of instruction.

7. The quality of teachers used in the new approach in teaching used in the experimental study are so different from those in the control group in the same study. The former may truly be great teachers while the latter are mediocre. Also, the quality of teachers used in the experimental study may be quite superior to those where the research results are to be applied in a classroom setting, thus making for a lack of external validity.

Eighth, pupils' learning by discovery has been advocated by educators for the past forty years, approximately. Learning by discovery stressed that pupils are guided by the teacher to find out on their own. Discovery learning is an inductive approach used by selected teachers in teaching as compared to deductive teaching. With deduction, the teacher explains to children how something is to be done or what is to be learned. A recent research study (Hoff, Education Week) states that both approaches need to be used based on a teacher's preferred style. It is also recommended that a variety of procedures should be used in teaching pupils. This study was done pertaining to mathematics and science. The questions arises, "Are the research results applicable to the teaching of reading also?" In other words, are the results of the study valid for reading instruction? (See Dewey).

Ninth. Cooperative learning has become an important trend. Selected educators have recommended that pupils study/learn in cooperative endeavors throughout the day where applicable. There are a plethora of reasons given for cooperative, or small group learning:

1. pupils may assist each other when involved in small group endeavors.
2. pupils may interact with each other and learn vital social skills.
3. pupils test their very own ideas in cooperative learning; the ideas acquired are modified as needed when they are discussed.
4. pupils may well develop feelings of belonging which is important psychologically.
5. pupils might well receive recognition within a group and have esteem needs met.

To every action, there appears to be an opposite and equal reaction:

1. one or two pupils may do all , or nearly all, of the work to be done in a committee.
2. this is not the favorite learning style of selected pupils (See Searson and Dunn). Some pupils prefer to do school work individually.
3. a few pupils may prefer to have others complete the work in a cooperative project. Ideally, all need to be involved and work together in cooperative learning.
4. even if pupils desire to learn by the self, there still are opportunities to work together with others on selected tasks.
5. it is easier to evaluate individual pupil achievement accurately as compared to assessing a collective at work. Thus, it is difficult to evaluate each pupil in cooperative learning than when the learner works by the self.
10. The theory of multiple intelligences is mentioned frequently by writers in education (see Gardner).

Tenth, integration of content is strongly emphasized. With writing across the curriculum being stressed strongly, subject matter for writing may come from diverse academic disciplines. If pupils individually choose what to write about. Then the content inherent in the written product will indeed be diverse in the curriculum. When pupils view the language arts in terms of integration rather than a separate subjects curriculum, multiple academic disciples will be an end result in the written product. The literature curriculum will also then stress pupils reading about diverse topics. What is read might well provide the spring board for written work. Expository, creative, and narrative writing will also be in evidence.

Closing

Teachers need to stay abreast of the latest trends in the language arts in order to offer an updated curriculum. It is important that pupils learn to communicate well and become proficient in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The language arts areas are vital in each academic discipline and integrate well with diverse subject matter areas. They are also salient in society when interacting with others. Quality communication is a must for earning a living as well as for good human relations.

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